SACHI SAKHI

By Bhai Sahib Sirdar Kapur Singh, National Professor of Sikhism,
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A question has often been posed whether emergence of Sikhism is only an accident of history or it had any deeper purpose to serve and functions to discharge. No serious attempt has ever been made to answer this question in an adequately satisfactory manner. Arnold Toynbee has characterised Sikhism as "a would-be synthesis of Hinduism with Islam which had started by practising fraternity as a corollary to its preaching of monotheism, but which went astray through allowing itself to become the sectarian faith, the militant founder of a successor State of the Mughal Raj, and had come eventually to be little more than the distinctive mark of a community that has virtually become another Hindu caste". The ideologues of Sikhism, even while paying lip sympathy to this idea of Sikhism as a "would-be" or real synthesis of Hinduism with Islam laid greater stress upon the role of Sikhism as a defender of Hindu *Dharma*. Some pseudo-Marxists have, through transmutation of terms and expressions, tried to work out some sort of a rationale for Sikhism and attempted to assimilate its history and tradition to dialectical categories.

Even if one does not agree with Toynbee that Sikhism betrayed its essential inspiration by becoming a sectarian faith which ultimately led to its virtual assimilation in the Hindu social milieu, the historical situation has changed so radically that the role of Sikhism as a synthesis between Hinduism and Islam is of no more than an academic interest only. The contemporary relevance of such a role is all but significant.

As regards the role of Sikhism as defender of Hindu faith it should not be forgotten that the resurgent Hinduism looks askance on such 'insinuations'. The advent of the British rule signified not only consolidation of all different nationalities into a polity but also extinction of the danger to the survival of Hinduism posed by Islam for eight centuries preceding the British rule. Even if the assertions by Sikh theologians of the role of Sikhism as fighter in the cause of Hinduism was tolerated in the British India as a concession to the continuing confrontation between Hinduism and Islam, it is considered almost an impudent arrogance by militant Hinduism of today. It will be relevant in this context to recall the remarks of a reliable interpreter of contemporary Hindu mind, Mr. Nirad C. Chaudhry:

> "They (the Hindus) are the masters and rulers. They have regained political power after many centuries, and are fully aware of it, perhaps over-aware. They are also the only source of energy for the country considered as a human machine; and it is their desires and aspirations which are keeping it running. No other element counts. As the current jargon describes all the non-Hindus, they are *only minorities*.
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> . . . . At least I have no hesitation in saying that if the history of India has taken a certain course in the last fifty years or for that matter in the last thousand, that is due, above all, to the Hindu character. It has been the most decisive determining influence on the historical process. I feel equally certain that it will remain so and shape the form of

everything that is being undertaken for and in the country."

In the face of such an unambiguous hostility towards minorities, it will be only vain on the part of any community to claim for itself a distinctive personality of its own, different from that of the dominant community and yet to believe in its role as a defender of the latter. Moreover, even if it may be conceded that Hinduism in a particular historical situation needed the support of Sikhism for its survival, how does it flow from such a logic that the Sikhs have a similar role to play even today, when Hinduism does not face any challenge from outside?

It will be seen that both these approaches to the problem of an understanding of Sikhism may explain some features of Sikhism which were perhaps over-stressed in particular historical contexts, but they neither severally nor jointly account for the total reality of Sikhism. Moreover, they also fail to provide for a contemporary relevance of Sikhism. Obviously, both these formulations should lead to the conclusion that Sikhism was, in ultimate terms, only an accident of history and at best emerged to discharge a particular historical role which, notwithstanding its success or failure, does not inhere any more.

As compared with these two approaches to Sikhism some half-hearted attempts have been made by some pseudo-Marxists to channel the inner dynamism and social energy generated by Sikhism during its historical evolution towards the task of a socialist evolution. Since the basic inspiration for these attempts was tactical only, neither academic nor intellectual, they resulted in turning the essential concepts and ideals of Sikhism inside out, through-not-so clever jugglery of words. In their eagerness for transmutation of the ideas and concepts of Sikhism and Marxism these pseudo-Marxists have singularly failed to perceive the distinctive originality of these ideas or the basic integrity of the deeper motivations behind them.

It is also very pertinent to note that the medieval period of Sikh history within which Sikhism arose as a distinctive faith and registered its achievements both in the history of ideas and as a way of life has not received much serious attention during the last 27 years of Indian historiography. It appears as if Indian historians have developed some sort of an amnesia towards this period. Except for some digging out of old records of Muslim courts by Muslim historians and manipulation of medieval history by the so-called nationalist school of Indian history for contemporary purposes, which most of the time degenerated into offering some sort of an apologia for Islam in India, there is a singular lack of interest, especially in the history of ideas of this period. As against this antipathy, on the one hand, and attempts for offering apologia for Islam, on the other, in India, the Pakistani historiography has indulged in glorification of the Muslim period of Indian history. The result in both the cases has been relegation of Sikhism and Sikh history to the position of a foot-note in the history of the sub-continent. It is in this overall context that *Sachi Sakhi* has a significant contribution to make to the study of Sikhism and to an understanding of the history of Sikh people. Within the folds of this thin volume in Panjabi, is encompassed a strikingly original and yet cogent and coherent interpretation of the creative evolution of Sikhism. Even if it was not the intention or the undertaking of Bhai Sahib Sirdar Kapur Singh to demolish any of the theories and formulations about Sikhism the appearance of this book has rendered the task of reconstructing them almost impossible. The main body of the book comprises a scholarly reappraisal of Communal Award which was designed by the British genius as a political formula to account for the religious plurality of British India. But the range of the discussion is so wide and the ground for his arguments has been laid by Bhai Sahib Sirdar Kapur Singh so deep that the historical significance of the Communal Award becomes coterminous with the consummation of a process of history which developed and manifested a logic of its own.

Broadly speaking, Bhai Sahib Sirdar Kapur Singh's focus rests upon two central themes:

firstly, to determine the historical necessity of Sikhism and secondly, to offer a first-hand account of the course of Sikh politics leading up to the Independence of India, which resulted in expropriation of lands, properties and sacred shrines of the Sikhs and the physical displacement and migration of over half of the Sikh population from their ancestral homes, apart from the loss of life and properties in orgies of loot and arson. As regards the latter, the picture that develops is not only of political naivette and simple-mindedness of the Sikh leadership but also of down-right pusillanimity of the small men who got a chance to strut on the stage of history. They emerge as mortally afraid not only of the destiny but also of the history of a people they assumed to represent. Howsoever interesting as an engaging study in human pettiness and fickle mindedness, it is for the present reviewer, neither the most significant nor the most revealing part of this thesis. At best it only provides a human background to the design of ideas which is reconstructed by Bhai Sahib Sirdar Kapur Singh with a consummate skill, offering a bold and imaginative reinterpretation of Sikhism and the historical role of Sikhism.

In reconstructing the quintessence of Sikhism, Bhai Sahib Sirdar Kapur Singh's main concern has rightly been with the dynamics of Sikhism and with the historical manifestation of that dynamics only as illustrative of the essential spirit. He has carefully differentiated the contingent from the intrinsic elements of Sikhism. On the basis of the latter, he has developed a rationale for Sikhism which is equally convincing and original. Bhai Sahib Sirdar Kapur Singh envisions Sikhism not as a would be synthesis between Hinduism and Islam but as a means for continuing co-ordination and concordance between the Aryan spirit represented by Hinduism and the Semitic spirit manifesting itself in Islam which though partaking of the same universal developed into two mutually exclusive societies with compulsions and dynamics of their own. The historical necessity of Sikhism arises from the essential monolithic character and exclusivist nature of these societies which demand in their own characteristic manner conformist integration: within concentric plural society of Hinduism as a caste and the unicentral society of Islam as a convert. Sikhism emerged as a response to the complex dilemma in which both Hinduism and Islam were interlocked in Mughal India. The situation can be described as some sort of a cultural schism which was the product of confrontation between two mutually exclusive societies. The advent of Islam in India signified as pointed out by Dr. Niharranjan Ray "establishment and consolidation of an alien political authority; alien in religion which was of a proselytizing character and altogether alien in culture". The alien nature and the continuously alienating character of the polity fashioned by Muslim political power further deepened this schism. The crisis developed from the fact that Islam failed to convert a majority of Hindus to Islam and as an alternative refused to seek accommodation within Hindu society like earlier grating communities. By reaching past the religious particularisms of both these societies Sikhism asserted the unity of the spirit.

The four basic principles of the Sikh socio-political faith are formulated by Bhai Sahib Sirdar Kapur Singh as under:-

i) There is a basic identity between the Islamic or Semitic spirit and the Aryan spirit.

ii) That the Islamic religious laws and the Hindu caste system do not partake of this identical spirit. They operate in a manner derogatory to it.

iii) That the basic requirement for a sane social order is not a unicentral society, as both Hindus and Muslims believe, but a multi-central society.

iv) That the strength and firmness of a State depend not upon a unicentral society but on a free, full and real cooperation between its citizens and various social units.

A proper appreciation of this formulation should provide the key for proper understanding of the history of the Sikhs. To stand for these particulars in a Muslim polity which was committed to a unicentral society was to invite its wrath which the Sikhs did in a most glorious manner. It also meant championing the cause of Hinduism not only for the sake of its survival but also for its right for fullest participation in the affairs of the State. There was no contradiction, therefore, between the historical role of Sikhism and its assertion of the essential unity and universality of human spirit. The former was only the historical praxis ordained by the knowledge of the latter. A comparison of Sikhism and Sufism would indicate that while several orders of Sufism were close in spirit to Sikhism in their understanding of the essential unity of human spirit and the right of every human being to his faith and conviction, Sufism showed no particular inclination to proceed historically from this knowledge and to work actively for bringing about a society in which this truth could be established.

In the changed circumstances of an independent India Sikhs along with other minorities face the same dilemma, *albeit* with radical change in the role of Hinduism. The questions of separate identity of Sikhism and its survival are bound up with the struggle for a plural and a multi-cultural society in which all sections and communities can participate equally and freely without any feeling of alienation. If in this case the Sikhs find themselves once again in the vanguard of the struggle of those defined by Nirad C. Chaudhry as *only minorities*, their role flows directly from their basic commitments and principles.

The merit of this original interpretation of Sikhism lies not only in a very scholarly marshalling of historical evidence and erudite interpretation of the basic issues involved but also in the fact that it explains the different phases of Sikh history and self-identification of Sikhism at the same time as making the contemporary struggles of Sikhism relevant to its historical role of securing a multi-cultural, plural society in which human spirit could seek and realise fulfilment. Indian secularism which is both a recognition of the historical necessity and a *facade* for the ugly reality, can acquire substance and significance only through the success of this struggle. Otherwise, it shall remain a meaningless fetish and nothing more.

Bhai Sahib Sirdar Kapur Singh is a great scholar of comparative philosophy, religion and history of world civilizations. His knowledge of classical and modern languages both Indian and foreign is also unmatched, not only amongst Punjabi scholars but among the Indian scholars as well. He is a creative thinker *par excellence* and brings to bear upon his studies not only his manifold scholarship but also a penetrating and incisive intellect. His insight is illuminating and his ability to build his case is remarkable, both for the precision with which he examines all the implications of a problem and the skill with which he orchestrates different elements into a significant whole.

Apart from its undeniable worth as a scholarly treatise and as a document of historical importance, the present monograph is also valuable for its contribution to Panjabi prose style. Bhai Sahib Sirdar Kapur Singh writes in a very elegant manner but where he excels over everyone else is his masterly command over the art of attracting sharply satirical connotations for the apparently reserved and restrained expressions. A sardonic smile lurks behind the laconic terms he uses to put across his ideas. An awareness of this element of a deep-laid wit sustains the reader through abstract reasoning.

Attar Singh (Dr.)